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SUBJECT: APPARENT CRACKDOWN ON TER-PETROSSIAN SUPPORTERS

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SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Armenian police on October 23 detained 12 opposition activists as they publicly called for an opposition rally in support of the candidacy of Armenia's first president, Levon Ter-petrossian in the approaching presidential election. Police scuffled with, and then detained the activists, after they defied police orders to stop announcing the October 26 rally through loudspeakers at a busy downtown intersection in Yerevan. Among those detained were two editors of opposition newspapers and leaders of the pro-Ter-Petrossian "Alternative" movement. Several pro-Ter-Petrossian youth activists were also reported detained by police earlier in the day as they disseminated leaflets in a Yerevan neighborhood, as well as a photojournalist covering the youth, all of whom were subsequently released. An MP from the opposition Heritage party negotiated with police for the release of the 12 detainees, as did Ter-Petrossian himself, who arrived late in the evening and stayed through half the night until the release of the detainees at 3:20 am. The arrests come on the heels of recent developments where the authorities appear to be cracking down on supporters of Ter-Petrossian's expected presidential bid. End summary.

POLICE DETAIN ACTIVISTS CALLING FOR OPPOSITION RALLY

¶2. (U) In the early evening of October 23, police detained a dozen opposition activists who were publicizing the upcoming October 26 opposition rally at which former president Levon Ter-Petrossian is expected to formally declare his return to national politics after a decade-long hiatus. The activists had been walking through downtown using bullhorns to urge public attendance at the rally when police intervened. Footage broadcast by a local TV station showed police trying to seize the loudspeakers, after which a scuffle broke out and police appeared to set off a tear gas canister. There are conflicting reports that 20 or so participants in the scuffle sustained light-moderate injuries. (Note: According to Armenia's Law on Assembly, marches or rallies up to 100 people are authorized without prior notification to the authorities. End note.) At 3:20 am in the morning, all of the detainees were released, to shouts of "Levon! Levon!" and "Victory" by the approximately 70-100 people assembled outside the police station.

¶3. (U) Among those who had been detained were five leaders of the pro-Ter-Petrossian "Alternative Movement" that includes

editors of opposition newspapers harshly critical of the government: Nikol Pashinyan, leader of the radical opposition "Impeachment Bloc" and editor-in-chief of the "Armenia Times" daily; Shogher Matevosyan, editor-in-chief of the opposition tabloid "The Fourth Estate"; Mikayel Hayrapetyan, Chairman of the Conservative Party of Armenia; Petros Makeyan, leader of the marginal Democratic Homeland party; and Davit Matevosyan, a former MP. Seven other activists accompanying the leaders were also detained and taken together to the central police station in Yerevan.

14. (U) The opposition activists reportedly claimed they were forced to take to the streets to publicize their upcoming rally because, they allege, authorities have pressured TV stations not to publicize public events by opposition parties. Witnesses to the event reported also seeing riot police at the scene, and the arrival of police reinforcements at the central police station following the detention of the activists. According to the "Fourth Estate" newspaper, one of its journalists was beaten by plainclothes police, sprayed with tear gas, and required emergency care afterwards.

HIGH-LEVEL NEGOTIATIONS FOR RELEASE OF DETAINED

15. (U) According to media reports, the first person to negotiate for the release of the detainees was Larisa Alaverdian, an MP from the Heritage opposition party, who, like many others at the scene who sought access to the detainees, was initially rebuffed from entering the police station. She was later joined by, and allowed inside the police station, with another Heritage MP, human rights Ombudsman Armen Harutyunan, and former President Levon Ter-Petrossian himself, among others. Between 70-100 supporters assembled outside the police station, which included leaders of various opposition political parties such as Stepan Demircian of the Armenian Peoples Party, Babken

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Araktsyan, former National Assembly Speaker and member of the pro-Ter-Petrossian Armenian National Movement (ANM), Ararat Zurabyan, ANM Chairman, Khachatur Sukiasian, a pro-ANM prominent businessman, and others. The crowd of supporters shouted opposition slogans in defense of the detained.

16. (U) According to reports, Ter-Petrossian unexpectedly arrived at the central police station at 11:30 pm to negotiate the release of the activists, and along with other ANM leaders asked the assembled crowd to maintain calm and respect the law. He and his bodyguard were allowed to enter without any incidents, and the police cordon in front of the police station was subsequently removed. The former president stayed until the release of the detainees well into the morning. After his release, Nikol Pashinyan publicly stated that "we were released only because of him (Ter-Petrossian)," and that the detainees would have been formally arrested absent the former president's intervention.

INTERPRETATIONS OF EVENTS

17. (SBU) Ter-Petrossian loyalist and former Foreign Minister Alexander Arzoumanyan told us after the release of the detainees that since "we do not have access to TV," posting of leaflets has been the only way to inform the public about the upcoming rally. He added that activists who have been dispatched to regions to publicize the rally there have also been harassed by the authorities, including governors, and that regional police have called activists into various stations for questioning. Arzoumanyan stated that before the events of the preceding evening, ANM youth activists throughout the day were being detained in Yerevan, allegedly for driving-related offenses, but later released after ANM

officials intervened. He says the police indiscriminately used excessive force in the evening, during a "peaceful" march, on youth, males and females alike. Arzumanyan said there were no serious injuries, but activists were kicked by police. He confirmed that Ter-Petrossian arrived at 11:30 pm and stayed until the release at 3:20 am. To his knowledge, no criminal charges have been filed, but he would not be surprised if they followed later.

¶8. (SBU) Misha Danielyan of the human rights watchdog "Helsinki Association" told us that he was at the police station until one in the morning, and that the authorities had acted with "total impunity" when police prevented detainees' lawyers from entering the police station. He said that tear gas had been used, and sprayed at people's faces. The office of the government's Human Rights Defender (Ombudsman) -- who was also in the police station overnight -- informed us that only 11 individuals had been detained, that detainees and police alike sustained injuries, and that police provided referrals for medical care to the detainees requiring attention. The office also told us that the police are preparing criminal charges against detainees for assaulting their officers. The Ombudsman has not yet made a public statement on the events, but various news outlets report that he declared there had been insufficient grounds for detaining the activists.

9.(U) According to the government daily "Hayastani Hanrapetutian," police intervened during the march when it began to hinder the flow of traffic and attempted to stop public transportation. Scuffles then broke out after activists allegedly began to insult and curse police, after which they were detained and taken to the central police station for questioning. Some policemen reported sustaining injuries during the altercations.

¶10. (U) While the detained were still in custody, Babken Arakstyan, ANM member and former National Assembly Speaker, blasted the authorities, calling the ruling regime a "deluded, nervous state." He added that "they (the authorities) understood that the situation in Armenia has changed, but they cannot fight against us." After his early morning release, Nikol Pashinyan called on those assembled outside the central police station to continue distributing rally leaflets in the morning. Later in the day, Pashinyan announced he and other detainees would hold a press conference on the preceding day's events.

IS THE LTP CRACKDOWN UNDERWAY?

¶11. (U) In early October, opposition leaders announced the
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holding of a large, opposition-wide public rally scheduled for Friday, October 26, where it is widely expected that Ter-Petrossian will formally announce his candidacy for the February, 2008 presidential race. The rally's timing is also significant, coming one day short of the anniversary of the 1999 assassination of Armenian leaders at the National Assembly. Former President Ter-Petrossian has recently raised his profile, making his first major public speech in years in late September, meeting with government and opposition party leaders, and making a trip to Nagorno-Karabakh where he met with the recently elected "president" of the non-recognized breakaway territory. Other opposition leaders are slated to join the former president at the rally, including Stepan Demirchian of the People's Party of Armenia and Aram Sargsyan of the Republic Party. The rally has received formal approval by Yerevan's city government.

¶12. (U) The arrest of the opposition figures and Ter-Petrossian loyalists comes on the heels of seemingly related events where authorities appear to be clamping down

on support for the former president's candidacy in the upcoming election. The owner of the Gala TV station located in Gyumri, Armenia's second largest city, claimed October 22 that the authorities are trying to punish him for airing in full Ter-Petrosian's September 21 Independence Day speech that criticized the authorities, which he says he aired as a paid advertisement despite being warned by the government-controlled National Commission on Television and Radio not to do so. The owner also said that officers from the Gyumri branch of the National Security Service visited him shortly after airing of the speech to warn him to stop covering Ter-Petrosian's political activities. Breaking media reports from Gyumri state that Armenian tax officials raided Gala's offices on October 23.

¶13. (U) Meanwhile, the ruling Republican Party has announced a free pop concert at a downtown stadium to compete with the ANM rally. Media and political observers here largely view the concert's coincidental timing as an effort by Ter-Petrosian's opponents to deflate his political sails. The move has also been assailed for its alleged insensitivity to the tragic events of the 1999 National Assembly assassinations. In addition, police in different neighborhoods of Yerevan have recently been spotted tearing down posters publicizing the October 26 rally.

¶14. (U) On October 18, leading Armenian media figures and monitors expressed concern over what they allege has been a recent move by the country's largest media outlets to curtail their coverage of politically oriented news in advance of the 2008 presidential election. Two of the leading press clubs in Yerevan complained that, in contrast to established practice, major television channels have begun to ignore their public events as well as news conferences held by politicians and public figures. The media figures have publicly expressed their concern over this recent development, and allege that the authorities are behind the move.

COMMENT

¶15. (SBU) The detention and harassment of pro-Ter-Petrosian activists in Yerevan and the regions appears to be the ruling authorities' first "push-back" to the former president's election bid. So far the former president has enjoyed abysmally low popularity ratings, with sky-high negatives. However, authorities' actions to oppose the former president's bid may perversely add greater legitimacy and popularity to the ex-president, who has been surprisingly crafty in his early moves. His chances of real success still seem small, but we should not count him out either.
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